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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Butler County Community College (Pennsylvania) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. Because the local population is overwhelmingly white, the general goal of the Action Plan is to revise course syllabi in American history, fine arts, and American literature so as to include the contributions of minority communities which students might otherwise never know. In American history, new textbooks were chosen, articles for required reading were selected, and the syllabus was revised. In liberal arts, American music was included in the curriculum, students attended a concert, and art students completed projects on American artists. In American literature, new texts that include a broader selection of writers were chosen and the syllabi were revised. Discussions asking students what it means to be an American, what divides us, and what brings us together were held. The three obstacles faced by the program were: the off-campus location of some of the classes interfered with communication, and some instructors' concern with academic freedom. At the time of the report, several courses' syllabi still required revision. Additionally, a study of the inventory/post-test in American history indicated that less change in student knowledge of America's various communities has been gained than was desired. (HAA)

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Butler County Community College
Exploring America's Communities
Progress Report

In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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BUTLER COUNTY COMMUNITY
COLLEGE

EXPLORING AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES

Progress Report

December 17, 1996

Introduction

Butler County Community College serves Butler County which lies in Western Pennsylvania and is partly rural, partly industrial, and partly suburban. The College admitted its first students in 1966. At the beginning of this term, Fall 1996, student enrollment in credit courses was 3,098; eighty students have been identified as minority students, fifty of those as African American, six as Native American, fifteen as Asian or Pacific Islanders and nine as Hispanic. This population mix, heavily White, non-Hispanic represents the mix in the community.

Action Plan Goals

Because the local population is overwhelmingly non-minority, the general goal of the Action Plan was to revise syllabi of several courses to include contributions of minority communities which students might otherwise never know.

A. American History. The two-semester American history survey sequence needed to be revised to incorporate more social and cultural history. The first major task would be choosing new textbooks in order to encourage us to think in new ways. A pre- and post-course student inventory would also need to be devised

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to assess any understanding of the new material which students may have brought with them and whether our instruction had had any effect.

B. Fine Arts. The task in Fine Arts was to examine content sections of Introduction to Art, Introduction to Music, and Literature and the Arts syllabi for possible inclusion of American works which would reflect American plurality. Pre- and post-course student inventories were to be devised and administered.

C. American Literature. The task in American literature was to revise the syllabi of the two American literature survey courses to include authors from American communities heretofore unrepresented. Because the revision was to be extensive, the syllabi needed the approval of the Humanities/Social Science Division, the College's Academic Affairs Committee, and the Faculty Organization.

Accomplishments

A. American History. Ellen Dodge coordinated the revisions for American history. New textbooks have been selected for the survey sequence: Norton et al, A People and a Nation, and Stephen B. Oates anthology, Portrait of America. Three faculty members who teach Early United States History collectively chose articles from the Oates anthology to assign as student reading, and they either helped draft or approved the inventory. The syllabus for Early United States History was revised. The pre- and post course inventory was administered to all students in Early United States History.

B. Fine Arts. Maggie Stock conferred with music and art instructors about inclusion of Americana from our communities into their courses. A section of the music course was devoted to American music, and students attended a concert of the music of American composers. Art students completed projects on American artists. Several new library resources have been ordered and will be incorporated into the course bibliographies.

C. American Literature. Dave Anderson coordinated the revisions in American literature. New texts have been selected for adoption that include a broader selection of writers. The American literature syllabi have been approved by all required groups and are ready for implementation in the Spring of 1997.

Obstacles

A. One minor obstacle to coordination was geography. One of the Early United States History sections and one of the Introduction to Art sections were taught at off-campus which meant some additional effort in communication with instructors.

B. Although colleagues were generally cooperative, it was necessary, from time to time, to counter fears that the project was somehow threatening to academic freedom. It was helpful to confer with concerned faculty members on a one-on-one basis. There was some small concern that the inclusion of the contributions of minority communities into the study of selected courses would lead to the exclusion of our founding fathers and those traditionally studied. Although the concern does not merit being labelled an obstacle, it has been difficult to convince the concerned faculty member otherwise.

C. There would seem to be no obstacles as far as students are concerned.

Tasks Remaining

A. The syllabi for Recent United States History (the second semester of the American history sequence), Introduction to Art, and Introduction to Music have yet to be revised.

B. An inventory/post-test for Recent United States history has yet to be formulated.

C. A study of the inventory/post-test in American history reveals that not as much change in knowledge of America's various communities has been gained as had been desired.

Discussions with Students

During the term, there have been discussions with students as to just what we were trying to accomplish with the America's Communities project. At the end of the term, several questions were put to a number of classes involved in the changing curriculum. The questions and a summary of their collective responses follow.

A. What does it mean to be an American? Students opined that the freedom to pursue individual dreams makes us uniquely American. We have always been able to "start over," to be willing to change direction.

B. What divides us? There was no doubt among students that there are, indeed, factors which divide us: ethnicity, religion, and money. Ironically, as one class suggested, our individual rights actually divide us as special interest groups vie for their

separate and sometimes conflicting goals.

C. What brings us together? Americans are united for optimistic cuases such as the recent Olympics in Atlanta. But tragedies join us as well--as in national tragedies such as the Oklahoma City bombing.

D. What do we have in common? The American Dream is our common goal. That dream founded the country and maintains our form of government. Our recent, shared history unites us and makes us unique among nations.

Conclusion

This project allowed several faculty members the chance to reflect on the diversity of America's communities. While we on the project cannot take any credit for it, this fall the College Cultural Community Series included a performance by Jack Gladstone, a Native American storyteller, as well as a concert by Guaracha, a Latin American band. Futhermore, the new Multi-cultural Club, founded this semester, is sponsored by a faculty member not directly involved with the Exploring America's Communities project. The AACC project and these activities are fostering growing interest in America's diverse communities.